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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000233

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [QVIP](#) [LH](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HIGHLIGHTS STRONG BILATERAL
RELATIONSHIP IN KAUNAS

REF: A) Vilnius 49 B) 05 Vilnius 996

1. SUMMARY: Ambassador Mull traveled to Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city, on February 28 to discuss regional development, promote student travel to the United States, and pay a courtesy call on Lithuania's new Air Force Commander. The Ambassador highlighted our strong bilateral relationship and thanked Lithuania for its staunch support and valued contributions to the global war on terror. The Ambassador also praised Lithuania's efforts to spread democracy throughout the former Soviet Union.
END SUMMARY.

2. The visit to Kaunas was the latest in a series (reftels) of Ambassadorial trips to regional cities. Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city with nearly 400,000 inhabitants, served as Lithuania's interwar capital.

The Ambassador's Message

3. The Ambassador conveyed a consistent message to interlocutors praising Lithuania's support and involvement in the Global War on Terror, including leading a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in the difficult region of Chagcharan, Afghanistan. The Ambassador highlighted Lithuania's efforts to spread democracy to Belarus, Moldova and the Caucasus, and for its activist foreign policy through NATO in hosting the Baltic air-policing mission and contributing humanitarian assistance to Asia and Pakistan following recent natural disasters.

Kaunas's Future

4. At a meeting with the county governor and regional mayors, interlocutors highlighted Kaunas's economic successes, from attracting foreign investment, developing a Free Economic Zone, and expanding the region's airport. County Governor Zigmantas Kazakevicius detailed the youth and vibrancy of the region, noting that the region's population included some 50,000 students, and is home to some of Lithuania's most accomplished athletes, including former NBA star Arvydas Sabonis. Interlocutors told the Ambassador that the region had not yet benefited significantly from EU structural funds.

5. Ambassador Mull stopped by a local high school to reach out to young Lithuanians. Speaking before more than 100 twelfth-grade students at the Jonas Jablonskis Gymnasium, which includes President Valdas Adamkus among its former students, the Ambassador discussed American culture and urged students to consider studying in America. Following choral and theatrical presentations by students, the Ambassador presented an Embassy-produced DVD that encouraged Lithuanians to visit America and outlined opportunities available at American institutions of higher education. Students queried the Ambassador on his favorite aspects of Lithuania and the differences between the U.S. and Lithuanian university education system.

6. Ambassador Mull discussed the Lithuanian-American bilateral relationship and American foreign policy with students at Vytautas Magnus University. The students, part of the Lithuania's most prestigious Master's level program for diplomacy and international relations, questioned the Ambassador on America's policies toward Iran, North Korea, and the Kyoto Treaty.

Lithuania's New Air Force Commander

7. The Ambassador paid a courtesy call to Colonel Arturas Leita, who was appointed Air Force Commander on January 20. The Ambassador praised Lithuania's participation in the Global War on Terror, highlighting Lithuania's leadership of the PRT in Afghanistan. The Ambassador stressed the value that the USG places on its partnership with Lithuania's armed forces, and said that he hoped a counterpart visit for Colonel Leita could be arranged in the near future. He also expressed his commitment to continuing to send Lithuanian Air Force personnel for

training in the United States. (NOTE: Lithuania currently has three cadets studying at the U.S. Air Force Academy). Leita noted that Lithuania's Air Force, though only 1,300-strong, faces recruitment and retention problems.

18. Colonel Leita detailed the GOL decision to purchase three C-27 medium logistic cargo airframes, the first of which is scheduled for delivery later in 2006. Cost and the lengthy procurement process, said Leita, precluded the Air Force from addressing additional procurement and repair needs. Ambassador Mull encouraged Leita to work within the Ministry of Defense to bring the GOL's defense expenditures, currently 1.27 percent of GDP, in line with the NATO-mandated two percent threshold. The Ambassador also encouraged Leita to work more closely with his regional counterparts to assuage concerns within the Alliance that cooperation is lacking among the Baltic States, particularly regarding the stationing of air policing assets.

Lithuanian Lebanese Society

19. The Ambassador met with members of the Lithuanian Lebanese Society in order to heighten the profile of civil society and minority organizations in Lithuania. This interfaith organization represents the 200-plus Lebanese citizens resident in Lithuania. The group told the Ambassador that most of their members are medical and pharmacy students at Kaunas Medical University (KMU). Basem Ayachn, a fourth-year medical student who serves as President of KMU's International Students Association, told the Ambassador that the Association includes significant numbers of Lebanese, Israeli, and Pakistani students.

Media Coverage

10. The visit attracted significant local media interest. The Ambassador provided an exclusive interview to Kauno Diena (Kaunas Daily), the region's largest newspaper. The Ambassador also conducted interviews with local television and smaller print outlets following his meeting with the region's political leaders.

Comment

11. A frequent visitor to Lithuania's second largest city, Ambassador Mull used the visit to promote our bilateral relationship and to meet individuals who will continue to matter, both politically and military, for some time to come in the region.